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Gifted young adolescents: Addressing the “Who am I?” question

Lisette Dillon

Abstract

Despite the complication giftedness can add to the task of developing a personal sense of self during early adolescence little qualitative study is done with this group. This paper reports on a study that invited gifted young adolescents to author about their perceptions of themselves and their lives. The study used digital writing in the form of journal entries delivered by email to generate personal narratives from 12 participants over a 6 month period. With the researcher acting as an empathic listener/responder participants were supported in the expression of their thoughts and observations as authors about themselves and their lives. Findings suggest that the opportunity to self-reflect and to self express in the form of digital writing can offer a positive pathway to growth in self-understanding among gifted young adolescents. Furthermore, the involvement of an adult as an interested and responsive listener in an email relationship appears to facilitate a synergy for healthy self-disclosure.

Keywords: gifted young adolescents; identity; personal narratives; email.

Introduction

There is little doubt that giftedness can complicate the typical young adolescent search for a personal sense of self within a world of increasing complexity. Research suggests that feelings of loneliness and alienation among gifted young adolescents extend beyond those reported among typical age peers (Vialle, Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2007). It appears giftedness as a construct can add significantly to the ‘normal’ social-emotional challenges of early adolescence, and it is surprising that this group attracts little attention beyond counselling settings.

This paper aims to share a growing interest in narrative methods as a potential avenue for engaging gifted young adolescents with opportunities to *tell* about themselves. Specifically, the growth in use of online methods for data-gathering has opened up the possibilities for conducting research at a personal level that does not

rely on school or clinical contexts. The assumption is that the better a young person comes to know themselves the more likely they are to know how to manage themselves. Furthermore, having an opportunity to tell one's own story greatly increases the chances of becoming better known and understood by others. However, in order to create genuine opportunities for gifted young adolescents to represent themselves, efforts must be made to support their self-expression. This paper explains the use of journaling techniques in combination with email as an avenue for gifted young adolescents to describe themselves on their own terms.

The 'who am I?' question: giftedness and young adolescents

In addressing the "who am I?" question among gifted young adolescents, there are several ongoing concerns that have implications for a developing sense of self. One concern is that identity formation is challenged by the task of integrating giftedness with other aspects of early adolescent adjustment (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Moon, 2006). This means having to juggle the internal and external demands and expectations of a talent with the management of complex emotions along with all the typical aspects of being a teenager. It is inevitable that significant pressures will ensue. Another concern is the well-recognised issue of social emotional well-being that surrounds the struggle for acceptance that can emerge with entry to high school. Not only do gifted middle-schoolers face having to negotiate more complex peer relationships, they can also find themselves bumping up against an unreceptive environment. Against a backdrop of negative teacher attitudes and anti-intellectual sentiment that occurs at a broader societal level, feelings of exclusion can quickly escalate (Geake & Gross, 2008).

While some of the negative attitudes about giftedness may be in part due to misunderstandings about the effects of asynchrony, the impact upon a growing sense of self is very real. The flow of unrealistic expectations in self and from others creates a feedback loop that can be very damaging for the gifted young person's developing self-concept (Bickley, 2002). Since even brief periods of feeling excluded, whether perceived or real, can cause emotional distress (and even physical pain), it can deplete a young person's coping resources and undermine a sense of identity (Williams, 2007). To complicate matters, the response to fear and insecurity about social acceptance leads to the choice among young adolescents to suppress talent in favour of popularity (Moon, 2006; Rimm, 2002). Hence, the prospect for forming a healthy

sense of self among young gifted teens is under considerable pressure from the need to conform to own and other's expectations.

Since these concerns are ongoing, it points to gaps in understanding about the experience of giftedness and early adolescence that could be informed by young people themselves. Past studies focussing on the viewpoints of gifted young adolescents have strongly argued the importance of listening to participants as an important source of information (Coleman, 2001; Von Károlyi, 2005). Unfortunately, the giftedness field has been slow to take up qualitative research that explores the self-perceptions and daily realities of gifted youngsters (Coleman, Guo & Dabbs, 2007). Furthermore, a majority of research is conducted in school settings involving access mediation by adult gate-keepers and where the dominant language may not account well for children's own views about themselves (Morrow, 2008). As a result, close-up and nuanced accounts of the ways individual gifted young persons relate to themselves and their worlds may be missing from our catalogues of expert knowledge. However, things might not be as simple as the willingness to listen and the desire to tell.

Narrative meaning-making and emotions

In order to give personally satisfying accounts of themselves, gifted young adolescents may need opportunities to develop a vocabulary for emotional expression. While many gifted children exhibit advanced linguistic abilities, sometimes described as "narrative giftedness" (Porath, 2006, pg. 147), it should not be assumed they can describe different experiential aspects of their lives. This may be especially true when the complex and difficult emotions sometimes attached to giftedness are involved (Wallace, 2006). Moreover, since the intensity and unpredictability of emotions can create problems of self-management and coping for gifted young adolescents, finding ways to make sense of them is critical. However, the sidelining of emotions in favour of cognition may have stifled an appreciation for the role emotion plays in self-understandings and in a young person's ability to assess what is 'going on' (Shanahan, 2008). Research into understanding and regulating emotions advocates strategies that involve the "written expression of emotions" as part of coping during adolescence (Compas, 2009, p. 89). Where gifted young adolescents are concerned, reflective writing that provides opportunities to clarify emotions and to articulate different aspects of self can prove highly beneficial (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Hence,

gifted young adolescents' abilities to describe or address the complexities and the paradoxes that make up 'who' they are may be contingent on opportunity and practice.

Creating a narrative 'space' for research: Journals and email

In looking for ways to create narrative spaces for self-expression, journals sent as emails can allow gifted young adolescents to feel at ease with themselves. Journals in this sense refer to writing in a diary-like fashion with a strong focus on themes of 'me, myself and I' as a flexible and easy means to document issues of self. As a research tool, access is gained to individual lives in quite a close-up and personal manner, yet there is the added bonus of the researcher and the research process being invisible (Alazewski, 2006). Because of the minimum of intrusion, journals are especially suitable for use with "special" populations (Lee, 2000). Whether gifted young adolescents are thought of as a special population or not, journals may be an ideal way to reach them while they explore and express their emerging thoughts and self-perceptions. When used as a research tool, there is the opportunity to develop skills and confidence in self-expression as well as to share their knowledge as research participants.

As a digital setting for writing and sending journals, email is not new and exciting, yet it has some distinctive advantages over more popular online venues when it comes to reflective self-expression. While online social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are highly popular, they may not be ideal when looking for thoughtful and well-considered accounts of self. For instance, research into adolescents' use of such sites show they can be more about projecting specific kinds of images and maintaining a social reputation amongst peers (Carroll, Houghton, Khan, & Tan, 2008). Furthermore, online spaces for self-expression that are directed at peer-audiences usually feature the use of slick and colloquial language (Davies, 2006). It seems that any focus on peer-audiences may actually serve in some respects to limit what a young person might be willing to say about themselves. Email, on the other hand, allows young adolescents to feel more safe and confident, where they can take the time to think and to edit, and not have to respond immediately (Hewson, 2008). Used with care, journal techniques and emails can thus offer a practical, convenient and minimally intrusive research technique with young adolescents – especially where giftedness and issues of social acceptance are involved.

How email was used together with the traditional narrative genre of journal writing will now be put into context within the present study.

The study

The purpose of this study was to support the participants to share valuable information about themselves and their lives in a way they felt comfortable. The research was conducted outside of school, with participants free to choose their own spaces and to control when and where to write and which topics to share. This was done via regular journals written and sent as emails to me over a 6 month period. As participants had been responsible for their own styles and schedules, there was a high variance in the numbers of entries per participant, ranging from six to 36 across a period of six months. Across the arc of the writing phase, participants sent an average of 17 emails each (202 in total) — each presenting as highly variable in length, style and content. While I was a private audience in the first instance, participants were well-informed of the research purpose and the potential for a much larger audience for what they said. Parental support was critical to the project since an important part of the research design was that participants be given maximum privacy and autonomy in their journal-keeping. Parents were thus included in an initial focus group meeting as an opportunity to ask questions in a relaxed and informal setting, discuss the aims of the study and to assuage concerns about a non visible researcher.

The participants

There were 12 participants aged between 10 and 14 years, including six boys and six girls, drawn from a variety of educational settings across South East Queensland. Two participants were home-schooled at the time of writing. Participants had already been screened for giftedness within their own schools, both public and private, through a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures. Recruitment was carried out through expressions of interest using email, school notices, websites and conference fliers directed towards educationists, parents and gifted organisations. Key resource people such as teachers, school psychologists, educational consultants, and program co-ordinators then made direct contact with parents about the involvement of their children as prospective candidates.

My role as listener/responder

I had not met the participants prior to the study and my portrayal to them was as a friendly, professional person who was interested in them and their lives. I adopted a naïve stance, which means that I made no assumptions about the participants and they were constructed by me as the experts about themselves and their feelings. My role was to listen to participants without judging them, and with an undertaking to provide a response within 24 hours of receiving an email journal entry. However, participants were not required to reply to me, as such, but to send another entry when next ready. In this sense, I was a personal respondent who tried to be affirming but to not influence the flow or the content of entries. In order to enhance the likelihood of open expression, participants were as self-initiating as possible in their use of password-secured email accounts. I did not ask them any interview-style questions and their only directive was to “be themselves” as much as they felt comfortable.

How the emails were analysed

Once captured, participants’ journal entries were analysed using a technique called The Listening Guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003). This method involves strategies of close *listening* where the researcher aims to progressively uncover layers of meanings that may or may not be openly expressed. Such listening techniques are especially useful for specific groups or individuals who might not easily disclose about themselves. For example, this method has been used to explore anger amongst adolescent girls (Brown, 2003), to examine mentoring relationships involving adolescents (Spencer, 2006) and to examine identity amongst college-age students (Kiegelmann, 2007). Since it was assumed that participants in my study might not want (or have the language) to speak explicitly about their feelings, listening analysis gave a nuanced interpretation.

One significant step in the analysis process involves a focus on “I” statements that occur throughout the texts. This is because sentences containing “I” can give important clues to indicate the kind of self that is being portrayed (Ely, Abrahams, MacGibbon, & McCabe, 2007). The idea is to *listen* to what the “I” is saying as part of making interpretations about how a person is actively positioning themselves in relation to others. While any focus on “I” is only one aspect of analysis, and must be kept in context with other features of the text, what the “I” is conveying can be tracked across a number of texts to see what patterns emerge.

Data excerpts

The following data excerpts give a sense of what emerged when participants were given the freedom to choose their own topics and their own self-portrayals. Excerpts are organised into a selection of “I” themes that formed distinctive patterns of self-making. These are: *“I” as self-reflective*; *“I” as evaluator*; *“I” as storyteller*; *“I” as competitor*; *“I” as emotional*; *“I” as perfectionist* and *“I” as future adult*. Each of these “I” themes are viewed as being temporarily produced by self-reflection and are not meant to categorise or stereotype the participants in any way. Within the excerpts presented, the “I” sentences are in bold as points of reference, but are kept within context of what the author was writing about.

As authors, participants became self-observers who gave self-reflective accounts of themselves where they stepped back and tried to view themselves objectively. The first excerpt gives an example of how one participant saw himself in relation to giftedness.

Midas Well: “I” as self-reflective

Midas Well began his first entry with a general review of school events (as if to test the water) and it was his second email that was a gambit about not seeing himself as a gifted person. He was 11 years of age and his pseudonym referred to his initial considerations in joining the research. After making a tongue-in-cheek comment about being tempted to choose “Xavier Breath”, he decided he “might as well” participate as others might be helped by his contribution. In laying out the kind of person he perceived himself to be, he set up the ground rules by positioning himself outside the giftedness category. However, at the same time, he cleverly included himself by his reference to a psychometric assessment criterion.

Excerpt 1

*Personally, **I have never really believed in the term gifted, I have never afforded myself to think that way.** The word gifted is often used these days to describe kids performing above average. A term used by impartial bystanders looking into the achievements of those making them. But gifted essentially gifted in relation to the average. It is relative to what others do. **I have never felt that I was extremely smart; nothing that I do has ever made me feel extremely good.** Whether it be getting the highest mark in the state for a competition, or doing the identification test that tells you **you’re in the 99th percentile.** There is a danger*

to being accustomed to the idea that you are gifted. What is the point of getting yourself in a comfortable chair and congratulating yourself? Then there is nothing to strive towards, if you are telling yourself how good you are. There is always someone smarter than you, someone better. I have never been in the mentality that I am gifted. To be honest, I often cringe when people talk about me in that manner. I don't know whether they know something I don't know (I am as smart as they make me out to be?) ...but I don't see what all of the fuss is about. I have always thought of gifted as a term used to describe geniuses with more than impressive IQ's and slightly narcissistic tendencies. But one thing that I do know is that to myself, I will never be gifted. I don't particularly like to spread the fact around. Most of my friends outside of school don't know it.
(Entry 2 1/6)

Midas Well positioned himself as “I” who did not believe in popular conceptions of giftedness (on the grounds of everything being relative), shown in the first block of bold. He thereby created distance between himself and a perceived stereotype. By asserting “I have/will never” on five occasions, he produced a clear voice of resistance to inclusion in a category suspected of narcissism and superiority. In this way, he told us who he was by telling us who he was *not*. Ambivalence emerged regarding the prospect of others thinking him to be gifted and his own feeling of the need to hide his giftedness, acknowledging it at the same time as a “fact” of his own life, as shown in the final block of bold.

Participants made many evaluations, or judgements, about themselves and their lives in every email. However, some observations appeared to involve a more critical level of thought and consideration than others.

Lexie: “I” as evaluator

Lexie gave her opinions about her mother’s search for a good school and she then made her own appraisal that differed from the opinions of influential adults around her. Lexie was 13 years old and one of the older members of the group who was also homeschooled throughout the writing phase. Her evaluative commentary, shown as Excerpt 2, followed a visit to a specific school that enjoyed a prestigious reputation.

Excerpt 2

I think mum's secret interest/preoccupation is viewing schools, she loves the little country ones with the big, shady trees and water tanks and lots of space,

she always says there's got to be a good one with kind teachers and functional kids somewhere...The school with a big profile here is (Name). There are over 70 nationalities represented and a lot of the diplomats children attend, (not that that means anything to me, **I think their lives are so vacuum packed with wonderful experiences that they would succeed on life experiences alone**),so we went for a look and the deputy had time to talk with us then she took us on a tour. **It was a big shock to see the state of the classrooms and the general outside areas**, it's heritage listed as it's the oldest school in (City), c1923, but then so are a lot of the other buildings in (City) and they are in immaculate condition. Some of the seats around the quadrangle were broken and covered in mud, there was graffiti and waste litter everywhere, the bubblers were twisted and bent. The classrooms had the high ceilings and long windows with thick walls and could have been beautiful but they were trashed with papers and rubbish lying on the floors and some of the posters on the walls were ripped and just hanging, there were some kids in the classes who were paying attention but the rest looked mostly disinterested, some had their feet up on the tables. The deputy said their academic record is the best in (Name) and they win most of the competitions around the country. **The staffrooms that we glimpsed looked like a caricature of your worse nightmare! The teachers reminded me of Picasso's paintings!** Even after that interesting look into the life of the rich and privileged children (the catchment area for the school are the 3 wealthiest suburbs of (Name) where the hedges are green and tall, the roses abundant in the gardens and the average house value is at 2-3 million) mum still has hope!(Entry 12 20/11)

While there were few "I" statements in Lexie's observations, she showed in her descriptive account that she was becoming sceptical of her mother's mission to find a good school. She revealed in her colourful description of the teachers at the school in question, that she had resisted the parent (and principal's) voices and formed her own assessments of what she had seen. Not only did the judgements of key adults come under question from Lexie, but the class structure in Australian society that deems certain socio-economic areas to be better than others were found by her in this instance to be baseless. Lexie had determined that wealth was not a predictor of quality in terms of the delivery of education, thus revealing her ability to make complex evaluations.

Another aspect of being an author was the opportunity to practice storytelling skills. In order to communicate effectively about themselves, the participants put effort into different strategies for telling their stories well. For example, one participant paid attention to creating interest for the reader by adding drama, adventure and humour to his accounts.

“I” as storyteller: Fateboarder

Fateboarder’s entries were infused with an interest in action and adventure that appeared self-defining. He was 12 years old and would often employ a storyteller’s voice to portray himself at the centre of the action where he endeavoured to tell his story well. Excerpt 3 shows an incident where the participant was victim to bee stings and it illustrates the way that he created drama in order to add interest for the reader

Excerpt 3

I then went riding through the bush, but not the bush we normally go through. We went through a place we've never been before and it was great. There were heaps of kangaroos everywhere. We kept riding until we heard a distinct buzzing. "BEES!" L(name) shouted as we rode straight through a swarm of bees, right near some bee boxes. The bees attacked us, and decided to infiltrate my shoes, completely stinging my ankles. One also managed to get on my eyelid and my eye became slightly swollen. It was pretty funny afterwards, but the worst part was no one else got stung! (Entry 6 7/7)

There is drama in this excerpt, where the encounter with bees is shown in reported speech in the second block of bold. Not only was Fateboarder (and no-one else) stung, he was “completely” stung. How he set the scene is shown in bold, followed by the attack and then the resolution of the story where he constructed himself as a person who could recover and who could laugh at himself. This excerpt illustrates a proficiency in storytelling that the participant seemed to know would tell us that he saw himself as a person who enjoyed action and drama. Moreover, Fateboarder appeared to anticipate that a reader might be amused and entertained by his misadventure.

Another key “I” voice to emerge among participants was the desire to achieve in their preferred areas of talent. One participant gave many examples of the way she actively pursued competitions and how she monitored her progress.

“I” as competitor: Piggy-in-the-middle

Piggy-in-the-middle’s attitude to her athletics talent included a strong competitor’s voice that was focussed on winning. As a state grade athlete, she represented her state in competitions that involved a commitment to train and to travel for scheduled events. Aside from her track and field work she was also in an academic extension program at a private all-girl’s school. Excerpt 4 shows one of her accounts that revealed her insecurities as she assessed her chances of achieving a specific goal.

Excerpt 4

I love long weekends! I went to a running meet last night in (place) and I am so exhausted I don't think I could have gone back to school this morning. I'm a little disappointed with how I went last night. Then again, there was a head wind and I wasn't exactly fully prepared for it. I'm getting more and more worried about our athletics carnival at school because there is this other girl who is good too and for last couple of times I've been allowed to compete I've gotten age champion, but I think she might get it this year. I wouldn't mind if she got age champion (even though I would really LOVE [participant's emphasis] to get it) and I got second, but I'd be reminded of it for the next couple of years by her friends. (Name), our PE teacher said I've got sprints covered, she's got the throws, so It'll come down to the jumps and long distance events (not exactly my strong points). Anyway, she should stick to netball. (Entry 3 9/6)

The main features of this excerpt relate to the way that Piggy reviewed and monitored her passion for her talent, her exhaustion and disappointment, and her burn to win. Her “I” statements twice expressed her “love” of training opportunities for athletics and her “love” of winning competitions., thus conveying a depth of feeling that formed a strong overlay to the objective analysis she gave of her performance. However, the analysis of her prospects of a successive win as age champion showed an underlying voice of insecurity as well as her vulnerability to peer opinion that caused tension with her desire to win.

Expressions of emotion appeared in most participants’ writing as a generally positive aspect of their self-constructions. The next participant showed how her feelings of anger surfaced when she was faced with inadequate learning provision.

“I” as emotional: Chanel

In Excerpt 5, Chanel outlined a situation where she was angry with the mismatch of the Year 8 program supplied by Distance Education that intended to cater for her advanced learning needs: As context, Chanel, was homeschooled and her regular grade at school would have been Year 7.

Excerpt 5

I have been doing (Name) School of Distance Education work in the time before I go to the Academy of Health and Sciences. I received all my booklets, tapes, cds, headsets, posters and a lot of letters! I was informed I had online lessons, telephone lessons and a BSDE e-mail. I wasn't able to do any work until recently because of the packing and moving, but when I was able to sit down and do the booklets I realised that they were horrifically easy! They were talking about nursery rhymes and syllables in English, easy and repetitive algebra in math and science was talking about cells in baby words. Then I had an English telephone lesson only to find that my classmates couldn't identify Ireland off a map, pronounced repetitive.... ree-peetative and took 5 minutes to list how many types of tenses there are! I thought I was going insane! And I've been put up into year 8, the advanced class? Mum only signed me up so I could accelerate and do the HSC early. If I wasn't going to the Academy next year I would reach new limits of frustration that has never been seen before! Imagine if the teachers from 40 years ago knew what was happening now? Kids can slip through the system with no effort now, from k-12, get easy marks, leave school with a good recommendation and then into uni undetected to hit the brick wall. I wonder about people like me who are stuck with parents who are not as supportive, what happens to them? I know they disengage but what must their thoughts be every day as they gouge deeper ruts in the treadmill of their life.

(Entry 6 25/8)

Chanel took care to build her case in this excerpt and the anger she displayed appeared both considered and ‘in the moment’. Her writing was underscored by a highly evaluative response to the issue of the unsatisfactory curriculum content. Her anger showed in her short and purposeful introduction, her choice of adjectives, and in her derisive description of the telephone lesson. Yet her anger served a purpose, shown in her use of the phrase “people like me” that expanded her own dissatisfaction to include a protest on behalf of others (like her) who may also suffer from inappropriate learning opportunities. The implication was that she was a person who

needed accelerated learning that was a genuine challenge to her ability. Chanel thus projected an angry “I” who believed her ability to achieve depended upon appropriate learning opportunities that in this instance were being impeded.

Perfectionist thinking appeared in various ways throughout participants’ descriptions of striving for measurable outcomes. For some, their own high expectations were motivating, but for others, the voices of self-criticism could be quite debilitating.

“I” as perfectionist: Moochie

Moochie seemed to expect to always be able to do her best, but sometimes she found it difficult to self-manage. Excerpt 6 shows an instance where 10 year old Moochie succumbed to a build-up of stress and perfectionism that caused her much anxiety. In the following instance, she demonstrated her ability to sum up her stressors quite objectively, but she was unable to stop her emotions flooding in because of tiredness.

Excerpt 6

I'm feeling really horrible right about now. It's late I'm tired, I've just been on camp and to a fishing trip and I've got an oral to do tomorrow with a powerpoint presentation. It's meant to be 2-3 min but of course mine is 5min and 44 sec. When mum tries to help me cut some of it out I really don't want to because I made the powerpoint all term and the oral today out of my report. It makes me really angry because everything has gone wrong at the last minute. I hate myself and I don't want to do my talk at all. Mum thinks it's great and really good and everything. She sat with me to help me try to work it out for half an hour and we both missed our favourite tv show. Mum offered for me to take the day off and go to work with her and relax but I said I would have to do my talk anyway and catch up on what I missed out on and I would feel guilty- it seemed to me like cheating. Mummy was only trying to help me. I hate myself and I'm crying. (Entry 4 10/6)

In this excerpt there was a cross-talk of voices that disrupted the participant’s ability to cope with what might have appeared to others as a relatively simple task. The first block of bold sets the scene. The second block of bold shows an angry voice where Moochie felt her efforts “all term” would not be recognised in the restrictive format of a short power-point presentation. In the same section, her self-critical voice

expressed anger with herself about her perceived unpreparedness for the task, serving to drown out the external parent voice of reassurance. As a consequence, another layer of voices of anxiety and guilt flowed from her awareness that she was being problematic for her supportive mother. The third section of bold shows further tensions were added when the voice of anxiety pressured her to find a way out and the ethical voice interjected to tell her she would be cheating. Here, she portrayed herself as a person who felt pressure and anxiety attached to achievement but who was not prepared to behave unethically as a consequence. The excerpt thus showed how voices of anger went in two directions: first to the nature of the task as an inadequate measure of her efforts; second as a form of self-directed anxiety and perfectionism about her own management.

While participants would often refer to their short term plans, the concept of themselves as future adults appeared to have special significance. The next participant frequently wrote of his frustrations with the regular curriculum and it was his plan for the future that gave him direction and hope.

“I” as future adult: Random

Random was in Year 9 and he had been accelerated to Year 10 for his Maths and Science subjects. In Excerpt 7, Random expressed frustration surrounding the end of year assessments that caused him to think about and to hope for a specific way forward. He made plans for his future expressed as a specific sequence of events.

Excerpt 7

The past few months have just been stupid. School is crazy and I have a million and one assignments to do, and quadratic equations test to do. It is all just crazy. I only have hopefully 3.5 weeks left, that is if I leave the same time as all the year 10s do. Well if I don't I will spend exactly half of the time doing nothing, and I don't think my year 9 subjects will give me that many assignments to occupy me. I have been thinking a-lot about what I will do when I leave school and I am hoping that I will go do a Bachelor of Science at UQ and then get my Honours and then get a PhD in Biochemistry. I am, also, hopefully going to go to (Name) after Christmas. I cannot wait till school ends. (Entry 6 7/11)

In the first block of bold Random reported counting the weeks until his school year finished, and feeling critical about the uncertainty surrounding his completion time. Random's desire to achieve in his talent area of Maths and Science included a

sense of being held back by the tedium of normal classes. In the second block of bold his thoughts about the future appeared to provide hope for there being a purpose to having to endure school in the present. His voices of resistance were part of a strong commitment to develop his talent areas and they spurred him to look forward to a future of success in the field of science. A feature of his thinking was the specifics of his plan, where he envisaged three steps in achieving his goal of becoming a future adult. In this way, his self-construction as an achiever “I” involved a particular vision for the future that helped to fuel his motivation and to ease the tension he felt about regular school.

These excerpts are a very small sample of the highly individual responses that emerged when the participants were given to an opportunity to author about themselves.

Discussion

This discussion centres on the significance of finding extended windows of access to gifted young adolescents as informants that might contribute to fresh conversations about their issues of identity. Across six months, the participants in this study projected many “I” voices that were each equally valid in terms of answering the “who am I?” question. It became apparent that there were many different “I” positions that they adopted, each potentially requiring a space for self-expression. These different “I” voices thus represent an attempt to think about gifted young persons beyond lists of fixed traits and characteristics. As an important part of addressing the notion of integration, described by Assouline and Colangelo (2006), it makes sense for young adolescents to be encouraged to articulate different aspects of themselves. For example, Midas Well appeared to grapple with the notion of his giftedness as being something that was simultaneously ‘me’ and ‘not me’. His ambivalence seemed to stem from his rejection of the prevailing narratives that surround giftedness stereotypes that he did not accept as self-defining. It is difficult to imagine that his thoughts on giftedness would easily emerge for clarification during his regular everyday conversations at school. While Piggy-in-the-middle was afforded an opportunity to express her competitive urges through her athletic talent, at other times she struggled to also integrate her academic achievements causing her many tensions. For Lexie, the act of ongoing expression of her own opinions appeared to

affirm her ability to evaluate for herself, beyond the authority of key adults around her. In contrast to Lexie's style of analysis, Chanel's emotive scrutiny of a disappointing schooling experience was also revealing. Her anger illustrated how closely entwined her emotions were with her need to have appropriate learning experiences as a self-defining aspect of being a person who wanted to achieve. These few excerpts revealed participants to be self-reflective, highly evaluative, storytelling young people whose emotions and motivations were closely tied to a self-defining need for achievement. However, the participants showed many different facets of themselves, where contradictions and tensions emerged as they navigated multiple "I" positions. In contrast to approaches that may only provide a snapshot, or one-dimensional view, narratives over extended time seemed to offer the participants avenues for expressing these many different "I" voices. In sum, while it is not possible to generalise from this study, the experiences of these participants point to the value of finding ways to capture fluidity and dynamism in individual gifted young adolescents.

As a final word, one important and satisfying aspect of using the methods described in this paper was the two-way benefit that flowed throughout the research phase. In the process of participants' authoring, ongoing feelings, thoughts, goals and behaviours could be identified and clarified, giving valuable insights to each individual as well as to me. In one respect, the participants were also listening to *themselves* as they wrote their journals. Therefore, not only did the participants produce rich and complex data, they were supported in developing a language to say 'who' they were. In her final entry, Piggy-in-the-middle wrote:

"It was fun writing and waiting for your responses. I learnt that I have accomplished heaps over these past 6 months. I also learnt that I am very capable of a lot of things. I really liked just being able to tell somebody all the things that were going on in my life. I think that was the best bit." (P 26/11)

Conclusions

This paper described a small-scale narrative study that aimed to gather person-level information from gifted young adolescents about themselves. Findings show that the provision of extended opportunities for self-authoring via email, construed as a narrative 'space', supported self-awareness and self-understanding among participants. Specifically, a digital journal written and lodged in a way that involved

an adult listener giving affirming responses appeared to support the formation of a certain style of language for self-expression. Furthermore, tapping into personal narratives over an extended time has potential to capture different voices in the one individual, as well as the states of flux that are a normal part of self-making. Perhaps for gifted young adolescents to *be themselves* they might first need chances to explain 'who' they are to themselves before representing themselves well to others.

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